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Wilmington VA police earn national honors, to be recognized May 21

WILMINGTON, Del. — Three law enforcement officers with Wilmington VA Medical Center are national police officers of the year for 2018, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced. The VA officers will receive national recognition at an awards banquet this month.

Sgt. Pedro Custodio, Detective Chris Peters, and Deputy Chief Paul Woodland are three of nine VA police officers slated to be officially recognized May 21 at VA's 9th Annual Chief of Police Awards Banquet in Little Rock, Arkansas.

"There are more than 4,000 VA police officers nationwide, so having three of our own chosen at the national level is a huge honor," said Kim Butler, the associate director of operations for Wilmington VA Medical Center and its five outpatient clinics. "All of our officers work hard every day to make this a safe place for our Veterans, employees, and guests. I'm proud to have the efforts of three of our officers recognized at such a high level."

Pedro Custodio, a Veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps from Newark, Delaware, was recently named VA's 2018 Lead Officer of the Year (Category II). During the award period, Custodio served as lead firearms instructor, lead armorer, field training officer, and active threat instructor. He also trained more than 100 facility employees in the prevention and management of disruptive behavior.

"Sgt. Custodio is absolutely the best firearms instructor that I have ever had. His attention to detail and training plans are technically flawless," said Chief Jeffrey Steidler, who has led the Wilmington VA Police Service since September 2018. "What's amazing is that he does so much in addition to his regular duties. His peers trust his judgement, guidance, and mentorship. Pedro has earned their respect and mine."

In 2004, Custodio graduated with honors from the VA Law Enforcement Training Center in Little Rock. At LETC, he achieved the highest GPA among his graduating class. Custodio spent five years at Baltimore VA Medical Center before transferring to Wilmington VA Medical Center in 2009.

Detective Chris Peters, a Veteran of the U.S. Air Force from Dover, Delaware, was selected as the VA's 2018 Patrol Officer of the Year (Category II). Peters started with the VA Police Service in 2016, first as a dispatcher and later as an officer. He was promoted to detective in February 2019.

"Detective Peters is truly a community-minded servant. He is a dedicated volunteer firefighter in the Dover area, and he still performs his job at an outstanding level every day," Steidler said. "Chris displays a level of dedication that inspires a service mindset to all who work with him on a daily basis."

In 2018, Peters completed 500 initial and follow-up reports, processed more than 50 pieces of evidence, and trained three new officers and two dispatchers. He became qualified as a peer support counselor

and crisis intervention responder. Peters organized Wilmington VA's team for the 32nd Annual Law Enforcement Torch Run, an event that raised money for Delaware Special Olympics. He also represented his department at the state's 2018 Military & Veterans Mental Health Summit.

Paul Woodland, a Veteran of the U.S. Navy from Newark, Delaware, is the VA's 2018 Supervisory Officer of the Year (Category II). Woodland, who spent 11 years in the military as a master at arms, started with VA Police in 2008. As a civilian police officer, he has experience at both Coatesville and Wilmington VA Medical Centers. Most notably, Woodland was VA's 2015 Patrol Officer of the Year (Category II).

"Deputy Chief Woodland is the consummate professional. I am constantly in awe of his Veteran-focused work ethic and out-of-the-box thinking," Steidler said. "Since I arrived at Wilmington, he has been a large part of our success and an invaluable resource to me. Paul is the model of modern leadership in the VA Police."

Since becoming deputy chief of police, Woodland was nominated for the International Association of Chiefs of Police's Top 40 Under 40 Award. He was recognized by IACP for his work supporting their One Mind Campaign. Woodland wrote policy on law enforcement response to the mentally ill, launched an addiction recovery initiative called First Light, and chosen for VA's inaugural Chiefs of Police Leadership Development Program. He is an original member of Delaware's Veterans Response Team.

The three award recipients will formally receive their awards from Frederick Jackson, the VA deputy assistant secretary for the Office of Security and Law Enforcement. Jackson notified the officers via email with "the highest degree of excitement and pride." He described their work as "absolutely awesome."

"These honors recognize the best of the best in law enforcement. I am extremely impressed that the Wilmington VA Medical Center had three national winners for 2018. Pedro Custodio, Chris Peters, and Paul Woodland clearly represent the finest of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Police," Jackson later said. "I'm confident their work ethic and devotion to duty are admired by all. They are walking examples of the VA Police motto, 'protecting those who served.' Congratulations to these extraordinary VA police officers on their well-deserved honors."

Each year, the VA Office of Security and Law Enforcement solicits award nominations from 153 facilities across the country. The packages are split between two categories based on number of employees. Each submission packet remains anonymous during the scoring process.

Wilmington VA's police department is responsible for protection of life and property at facilities under the VA's jurisdiction. This includes the medical center, community living center, regional benefits office, support structures, grounds, and outpatient clinics. Wilmington VA has 20 officers, two dispatchers, and one program support assistant. Currently, 87 percent are Veterans with members from every branch of the military.

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